

Mark Bernard, *Selling the Splat Pack: DVD Revolution and the American Horror Film*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014. 216 pages. ISBN 9780748685493.

Studies of film usually focus on *auteur* filmmakers, the consolidation and cultural significance of various genres, or cinematic trends, whether thematic or aesthetic — all approaches that are typically textually intrinsic. Formal devices take pride of place as symptoms of broader cultural changes. Mark Bernard, Instructor of American Studies and Communication Studies at the University of North Carolina, instead focuses on all that is extrinsic to the movies themselves, paratexts in other words, and paints a convincing picture of why such an approach provides significant insights that are otherwise overlooked or obscured.

Bernard's basic argument is that films have always been understood in a broader context than the films themselves, and that much of how we understand films and their impact, comes from this extra-textual territory. However, much like the movie brats of New Hollywood (Scorsese, Coppola, Lucas, Spielberg and more) revolutionized American filmmaking with a deep understanding of film history, both American and European, so a new generation, is Bernard's claim, is revolutionizing American film again, this time through a deep understanding of the home movie market, online culture, and horror fandom.

This so-called Splat Pack, consisting of Eli Roth, Rob Zombie, James Wan, Alexandre Aja, and more, is less cohesive than the New Hollywood brats. Instead, their approach to filmmaking and especially the film industry is similar: they knowingly target home audiences rather than cinema-goers, because this allows a different form of filmmaking. Bernard operates with three main categories, industry, technology, and audience reception. Since the 2000s, audience reception has not been solely located in the filmtext but also in DVD special features and commentary tracks. Here, both filmmakers and audiences vie for control and insight into film meaning in ways that go far beyond typical spectatorship.

Working from a political economy perspective, Bernard delineates the ways in which contemporary American horror cinema is not a coherent political machine, nor is there any reason to understand these films within a reflectionist paradigm. Bernard argues against understanding contemporary American horror films as symptoms of the War on Terror, 9/11 trauma, or any direct cultural connection. However, Bernard's argument is not

that these readings are wrong in and of themselves, but more that such approaches obscure the actualities of film production, often conflate quite diverse films, and ignore the central fact of all films: that they are commodities.

The cohesion of the splat pack is therefore not ideological stance, or a desire to use horror films as forms of social critique, but rather that these directors have been successful in navigating the film industry, finding an audience that is willing to buy their films on DVD, and otherwise ‘giving the audience what they want’ without any sense of that being pejorative. More than a coherent genre or aesthetic form, the splat pack directors have found a production format that works exceedingly well and have made successful cult directors of them all. Bernard’s approach also convincingly explains how a director like James Wan can make films as different as *Saw*, *The Conjuring*, and *Furious 7*: he works the industry rather than a specific genre or aesthetic form.

If we stay with the *Saw* franchise, Bernard also gives a much-needed discussion of film seriality and how audiences understand franchises. Moving away from the tired notion of ‘authorial voice’ Bernard shows that audience interaction is far more significant, pointing to how the special features of all the *Saw* films produce a ‘clickable space’ for the audience to engage with. Such reenactment and reconfiguration also permeate the entire notion of film franchises. For the *Saw* franchise itself, this notion of reconfiguration is pushed even further with the films’ central concept of playing a game. The DVD special features are both designed to look like games and to invite the audience to keep playing. In other words, the attraction of the films can be continued on the DVD and will prolong the enjoyment of the primary text.

Bernard’s book is particularly useful for American studies scholars because it provides invaluable context for its specific area—contemporary American horror—but also for its method. Bernard does not discredit close reading models but does insist that cultural products—of any sorts—are always more complex, always embedded in a larger context. Significantly, many of the conventional arguments made about the splat pack directors—the extremely graphic nature of their films, their sleazy orientations, the directors’ maverick status—are not so much countered as shown in a broader, more detailed light. Rather than naively accept statements made by the directors themselves or their producers, Bernard reveals how myth building and deliberate framing are part of marketing these films and their directors.

While some may argue that only commercial directors and fads lend themselves to this form of study, I would love to see critical studies of recent movements such as slow cinema, smart cinema, and other artistic or critically acclaimed movements of recent years. Any cinema, in any form, is always embedded in a commercial environment, and although Bernard's book is very different, it is a worthy successor to Thomas Schatz's *The Genius of the System*. The study of production, industry, and technology holds a lot of promise for future research.

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Ryan Bishop. *Comedy and Cultural Critique in American Film*. Edinburgh University Press, 2014. 192 pages. ISBN 9780748698042.

What is film comedy? If you ask Ryan Bishop, laughter is only half the picture. Instead, comedy, particularly film comedy, should be regarded as an irruption, a challenge to the visual field and visual culture. Comedy becomes a way to question the very *techné* of film and visual technologies through exposing their inner logics. If this seems like a heady thesis for an often overlooked and ignored genre, Bishop argues it with convincing vivacity. We should not, Bishop argues, ignore comedy's capacity for revealing our culturally hoodwinked perception by making us appear foolish.

At heart, *Comedy and Cultural Critique in American Film* is not a conventional genre study. Bishop neither discusses genre histories, repetition and variation, nor the accretion of formal conventions. His errand is completely different and the book is stronger for it. Bishop outlines three ways in which he adds to the body of research on film comedy: 1) comedy stages cultural criticism; 2) comedic film addresses technology and *techné* head-on and so inevitably addresses the visual culture comedic film generates and questions; 3) adds to questions regarding the comedic in a critical theory vocabulary, rather than the psychoanalytic and representational debates that have dominated issues of comedy.

Bishop brings some much needed cultural critique into comedy, but at the same time this critical shift comes at the expense of moving slightly outside comedy proper. Bishop shifts between "comedy" and "comedic film" and other variations that seem to point to the same subject but in fact are slightly different. For Bishop, *Bowling for Columbine* is comedic, although